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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an effort to assist persons interested in establishing teachers' centers. This endeavor took the form of a three-day experience in which novices were able to visit several teachers' centers and to interact with experienced teachers' center staff. This workshop was coordinated by the Teachers' Centers Exchange. The relationship between contacts with other teachers' center personnel and the success these beginners have had in establishing their own teachers' center is explored. While follow-up data on this project was limited, some tentative conclusions were drawn. Contacts with persons already involved in successful teacher center practices were seen as useful for persons attempting to establish a teachers' center. Persons having some success in establishing a center appeared more likely to interact with other beginners. It is suggested that innovating teams need support on their home ground--from administrators, from a cohesive group of teachers, or from the community. If this support is forthcoming for beginning teacher centers, interaction with the teacher center network can facilitate implementation. (JD)

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USING A NETWORK OF EXPERIENCED TEACHERS' CENTERS TO ASSIST BEGINNERS

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This paper reports on one dimension of an effort to assist persons interested in establishing teachers' centers. The effort took the form of a three-day experience (a "workparty") in which these novices were able to visit several teachers' centers and to interact with experienced teachers' center staff. This effort was coordinated by the Teachers' Centers Exchange. First, a word about the Exchange.

The Teachers' Centers Exchange

Supported by the National Institute of Education, the Exchange facilitates communication within an expanding national network of teachers' centers and encourages participation in that network on the part of new centers and persons intending to establish centers. The Exchange is in contact with more than 300 teachers' centers and groups or organizations planning to start centers; it provides information and referral, identifying the needs and resources of individuals and directing them to others in the network who may be able to offer advice and assistance. This networking is accomplished by receiving and answering letters; responding to phone inquiries for information and advice; meeting teachers' center people at conferences, or at their centers, or at the Exchange; sending specifically chosen curriculum materials or documents to individuals in the network, based on a knowledge of their interests and needs; and helping distant and unacquainted practitioners exchange curriculum materials, program ideas and descriptions, research and writing. All this is done in a personal manner, with an emphasis on easy access and

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volunteered sharing within a network. We are less than a technical assistance agency, because the expertise about teachers' centers is dispersed around the national network. However, we are more than a clearinghouse, for we aim to extend the present network by putting people in personal touch with others of like premises, purposes, and problems.

The Workparty for Beginners

Since its inception the Exchange has responded to inquiries from persons interested in establishing centers. Early in 1977 we began a special effort to help a small group of these people in an extended, intensive experience which would put them in touch with a number of experienced teachers' center leaders. Through our newsletter and other contacts, we invited teams of persons from potential or beginning teachers' centers to attend a three-day "workparty" to be held in early March at several teachers' centers locations in the greater Chicago area. Seventeen teams were able to attend. The term workparty is used because we intend to convey a sense of both work and sharing among friends. Workparty programs consist of small discussion and activity-oriented groups focused on common interests and concerns. The Exchange had previously sponsored workparties which included participants from both experienced and newer teachers' centers. For the Beginner's Workparty we decided to focus on topics which we knew would be of interest to all beginners--management, staffing, programming, organization of space, etc. And we decided that persons interested in starting centers could best learn from persons who had already had that experience. Longtime network participants served as the program presenters at the workparty. Thus, in addition to attending workparty sessions held in six teachers' centers, the 17 teams were provided with the opportunity to interact with staff members from 14 teachers'

centers. These centers were representative of the wide diversity within the network: there were staff members from large, urban, centers, as well as from small rural centers; there were staff members from centers receiving federal, state, and school district support as well as from centers that are totally independent of public funding. Additionally, four Teachers' Centers Exchange staff members were present for the entire workparty.

Because this was the first effort on the part of the Exchange to provide a specific experience for beginners, we wanted to learn as much as we could about each of the 17 teams. Our main purpose in doing this was to obtain information that would be useful as we continued to offer help in the initiation and development of new centers. A second reason for seeking extensive information on each team was the possibility of follow-up research. We had entertained the notion of doing case studies on a few of the teams; that remains a possibility.

Data Collection

Information was obtained through a questionnaire completed by every participant at the end of the workparty, and a follow-up questionnaire distributed one month later. During the course of the workparty, a member of the Exchange staff interviewed one person from each team. As with all contacts between participants and Exchange staff, a record was kept of every interaction our staff had with each center from the first day of the workparty until the present time. Continuing interactions will be documented as they occur. In preparation for this report, interviews were conducted (by Steve Stripp and Barbara Piper of the Exchange staff) with one person from each of the 17 teams; these were completed in February

of this year. Although the interviewers sought general information about each team, they specifically probed for information regarding contacts teams had had with other workparty participants, with staff members of the workparty (the persons from the 14 experienced centers) and with other network participants. This report explores the relationship between contacts with other teachers' center personnel and the success these beginners have had in establishing their own teachers' center.

Based on February, 1979 data, each of the 17 teams can be placed in one of four categories: these are given in Table I. The first category, of which there is only one example, includes teams which successfully established a teachers' center since the workparty. The second category includes three teams which came to the workparty from sites which had already established a teachers' center (although in an embryonic stage) and which reported in February of this year that the center was continuing to exist. The third category includes those seven teams which reported that some teacher centering activities are occurring, and that the team continues to meet regularly although a fully operational teachers' center has not been established. The fourth category includes those six teams which reported little or no activity, and no immediate prospect of a center being established.

Some Cautions About the Data

Although this is a report on the relationship between contacts with the network and the staff of the Exchange on the one hand and success in establishing a center on the other hand, several caveats are important. We invited to the workparty teams which we knew were both interested in establishing centers, and which we knew had a number of potential problems. We had hoped that the experience of the workparty would help overcome those

TABLE I: TEAM STRENGTH, COHESION, AND CONTACTS WITH
NETWORK ACCORDING TO FOUR CATEGORIES OF TEAM STATUS (MARCH, 1979)

STATUS OF TEAMS AS OF 1 MARCH 1979	MEAN STRENGTH SCORE OF TEAMS IN MARCH, 1979 (Range = 1-3)	MEAN COHESION SCORE OF TEAMS IN MARCH, 1979 (Range = 1-7)	CONTACTS WITH OTHER WORKPARTY PARTI- CIPANTS		CONTACTS WITH STAFF OF WORKPARTY		CONTACTS WITH OTHERS IN NETWORK (NOT AT WORKPARTY)		TOTAL CONTACTS WITH NETWORK		CONTACT WITH TEACHERS' CENTERS EXCHANGE	
			N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$
CENTER ESTABLISHED SINCE WORKPARTY (N=1)	1.0	4.38	1	1	21	21	14	14	36	36	18	18
CENTER ESTABLISHED PRIOR TO WORKPARTY (N=3)	1.33	5.48	0	0	21	7	11	3.67	32	10.66	13	4.33
SOME TEACHERS' CENTER ACTIVITY BUT CENTER NOT ESTABLISHED (N=7)	1.86	5.45	17	2.43	33	4.71	4	.57	54	7.71	44	6.29
LITTLE OR NO TEACHERS' CENTER ACTIVITY (N=6)	2.17	4.67	6	1.0	1	.17	19	3.17	26	4.43	36	6.0
TOTAL AND/OR MEAN (N=17)	1.82	5.12	24	1.41	76	4.47	48	2.82	148	8.71	111	6.53

problems. That is to say, we did not expect a high rate of success, although we did hope that we could assist workparty participants in working through some of the possible impediments to the establishment of a center. We thought the workparty experience might be helpful to teams that had the will if not the way.

The prospect of the United States Office of Education support for teachers' centers was an important factor for some teams. The workparty was specifically identified as an opportunity to obtain personal assistance in working toward establishment of a teachers' center. We made very clear from the outset that the workparty would in no way assist participants in the development of their proposals for federal support. Those proposals were, incidentally, due two weeks after the workparty concluded. Any strengthening of the potential for a teacher center through a process of interaction with experienced teachers' center network participants could not, in the two-week time period have significantly improved the quality of the proposal being submitted. The five workparty teams which applied for federal support joined the ranks of some 400 other unsuccessful proposers. Clearly, if these five had been successful in their requests for federal support the success rate of the workparty teams would have been markedly different.

It would be interesting to analyze many new teachers' centers in terms of their contacts with the network and the Exchange staff, and to correlate the number of their contacts with measures such as staff satisfaction, teacher perceptions of the center, or other measures of "success." The presence of 61 federally supported centers makes this an appealing possibility. However, given the small number of teams present at the workparty, the division into four categories, and the unique nature

of each team, such correlations on workparty data would be meaningless. A display of raw data allows inferences to be drawn, but little more. (A small N also disallows any meaningful test of statistical significance.)

We also don't know to what extent our interviews with one team member were representative of the activities of the other team members. It is probably the case that some team members had contacts with network participants but that, in our interview with another team member, that contact was not reported. As an aside, we suspect that there was considerable benefit to those persons from experienced centers (which we refer to as the staff of the Beginner's Workparty) by virtue of their many opportunities to interact over the three-day period. We know of many of those interactions, but we can only guess at the actual number.

Seven of the 13 teams which are categorized as either having some activities but not a fully operational center or having minimal or no activities have submitted proposals to the Office of Education for funding beginning this fall. It is possible that some relationship between the number of contacts with the network of experienced teachers' center practitioners and success in obtaining USOE support will become apparent now that these teams have had a full year to interact with the network. We cannot tell yet.

Results

One year after the Beginner's Workparty, what have we learned from this small study? It is important to remember that the Exchange has extensive information on each of these teams, and that the numerical data cannot begin to suggest the depth of our anecdotal information or to capture the individual characteristics of each team. Nevertheless, numerical data do facilitate comparisons. Table I includes data obtained

through 17 interviews conducted in February of this year. One interview was conducted for every team attending the workparty. Teams were divided into four categories in descending order of "success."

Those interviewed reported the names of persons with whom someone on the team had been in contact. These were then divided into three categories: workparty staff (the representatives of 14 centers), workparty participants (fellow beginners), and other persons who exchange information within the network the Teachers' Centers Exchange serves. In reporting these data, some interviewees indicated they were having "regular" contact with some other network participants. In those instances in which the interviewer pursued this remark, an estimate of the number of contacts since the workparty was made, the average of these estimates was 7; thus whenever a "regular" contact was reported without a numerical equivalent, the statistic was reported as 7 contacts.

Data from the first category are grossly distorted due to the presence of only one team. This team, upon realizing that they were not going to encounter success in persuading their administration to apply for federal support for a teachers' center, set about to establish their own center. It is a community learning exchange, and serves teachers from many school districts. Although the N of 1 obviously disallows any generalizations, it is instructive to note that in every category except that of contact with other workparty participants (fellow beginners) this team had extensive contacts. They also had many more contacts with the staff of the Exchange; clearly their networking activity is correlated with their success.

It is interesting to note that more contacts were made with the staff of the workparty than with any other category. Apparently participants

valued the expertise of the staff, and continued their contacts. However, those teams with the least success had almost no contact with workparty staff. Most of their contacts were with participants in the network who were not present at the workparty. (This statistic is distorted by the fact that two of these teams are located near well established centers which were not represented on the workparty staff, and they maintained regular contact with these two centers. Nineteen of the 26 reported contacts with other network participants were made with these two adjoining and established centers. This situation does not obtain for any other teams.)

The 13 teams which have not been able to establish a fully operational center report more interactions with Exchange staff than with teacher center practitioners. Although we had assumed that access to experienced teacher center practitioners would be seen as a bonus for persons attempting to establish a center, it may be the case that until a center is fully functioning, initiators are more comfortable speaking with the Exchange than they are with persons who have successfully established centers. This suggests that the Exchange staff may want to take specific steps toward the linking of novices with experienced teacher center practitioners; in fact, this is now being done. At successive workparties we have attempted to integrate novices with a larger group of experienced teachers' center staff, and we will continue to do so.

We wondered if the familiarity, willingness to work together, and perceived ability to reach decisions would influence the success a team would have in establishing a center. To measure this we asked teams to identify "people who are involved in a major way in planning or governing your teachers' center or potential center." We then asked participants to indicate how well these people "know each other," "agree with regard to purposes," "get along in terms of mutual support and trust for one

another's opinions," and "arrive at decisions and carry them out." A comparison between the first and second round questionnaires was not fruitful because six teams failed to submit any questionnaires in the second round. However, scores on the first round indicate very little difference among categories of centers. As one might expect, previously established centers seemed to have a slightly greater cohesion among the involved persons, and centers with the least success have the least cohesion. The exception to this is the center which was established after the workparty, but that low score is explained by the fact that the two team members left the school system, thus indicating that they had less satisfaction with other persons who were important to the establishment of a center in that system.

Also displayed in Table I are numerical representations of the strength of the team as represented by all persons identified on the initial questionnaire as being important to the establishment or maintenance of a center. A score of 1 was assigned if the "back home" team was interpreted (by the interviewer's judgment of interviewee's remarks) as growing. In other words, there were some changes in the composition of the back home team (never more than 50%), and those changes reflected an increasing involvement of other persons. A score of 2 was assigned if the back home team was interpreted as being stable; that is, there were some changes in the composition of the team, but the roles represented remained the same and a sense of optimism was presented. A score of 3 was assigned if more than 50% of the back home team had changed, new roles were represented, and a sense of lowered interest and low morale was reflected in the interviews. These results are predictable and consistent with the success of the teams. The team which left their district and established an independent

center had the lowest cohesion score; this may be reflected in the high team strength score. At this point their cohesion score would probably be also very high.

Conclusions

From these very limited data, and from inferences gained from interviews and other contacts, some generalizations may tentatively be presented. First, contacts with persons already involved in successful teacher center practices were clearly useful for persons attempting to establish a teachers' center. Such contacts are apparently more useful than contacts with other persons who are just beginning. Second, persons who are having some success in establishing a center appear to be more likely to interact with other beginners. And if they have successfully established or maintained a center, they are less likely to interact with staff of the Exchange and more likely to interact with other practitioners. Third, with some teams interactions were much lower than we anticipated. This is a disturbing conclusion, and one to which I believe the Exchange staff should pay considerable attention. Possibly greater success would have been experienced if these teams had had more interactions in a "regular" workparty rather than being grouped with other beginners. Probably the Exchange should have made a more concerted effort to stay in touch with these teams and keep them in touch with other practitioners. However, in the spirit of the Exchange, we seek to place people in contact when they seek assistance or opportunities for sharing. We view teachers' center staff much as they view their participants--that is, learners must define their own learning needs, and continue to do so over time. Planned and imposed learning experiences are, in our judgment, less likely to be

successful than those experiences requested by the learner and based on his or her own learning needs. As long as participants in the network express those needs we do continue to respond.

It remains true that three embryonic centers were strengthened and one new center was established; seven teams are still hard at work, and six appear to have very little teacher center activity continuing. In the present educational climate it is refreshing to note that so many teams have at least survived and some have become stronger. Three of the six teams with the lowest level of activity have applied for USOE support, as have four from the more active category. Many teams that did not establish or maintain centers were caught by situational factors--failure to obtain USOE support or minimal administrative support. Innovating teams need some support on their home ground--from administrators, from a cohesive group of teachers, or from the community. Without some form of support, it's unlikely that help from afar will be very useful. But if they possess this support, interaction with a network can facilitate implementation. This is exactly what the network has been able to do for the more successful teams.